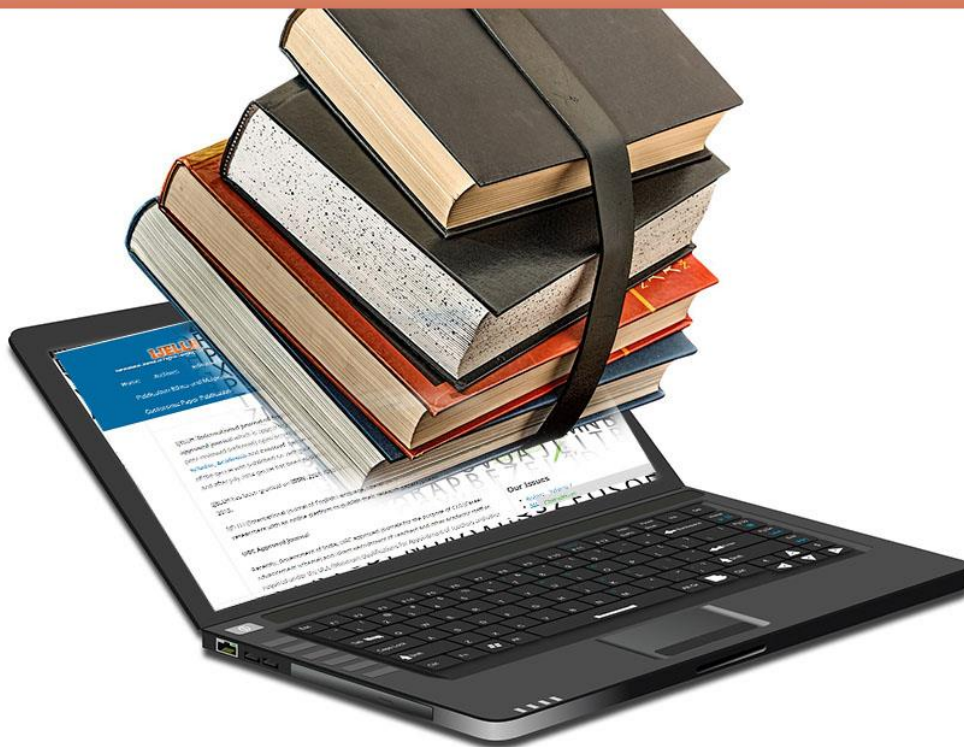


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Family as an Integral Part in Identity Formation and Self Definition

Abstract

Toni Morrison is the first black woman writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. She is a powerful voice and one of the most remarkable and influential novelists in the field of contemporary African American literary circle. First and foremost, as a black feminist writer, Morrison is more concerned about the visibility of black women, asserting the positive self-definition as essential. She talks about the ways to preserve and to rebuild black women's identity and dignity by facing and challenging the multiple oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism. She wants the image of the black woman to be presumed strong, powerful and independent. Her novels deal with the exploitation, sufferings, and humiliation of the Blacks in general and Black women in particular. They deal with problems such as feminism, racism, sexism, classism, the quest for identity, human relationship, identity confirmation, identity crisis and the quest for cultural independence. Many of her novels deal with the pseudo identity resulting from blacks' unfulfilled and failed attempt of finding out their true self and of identity formation. Ultimately, they embrace themselves not as blacks but as whites. The present paper tries to study the portrayal of Black people who are pushed to the margin of the society and their struggle for survival and existence in the face of the age-old ideology of racism

and classism. The Black women were more vulnerable as they had to face the triple oppression of race, class, and gender. The paper attempts to analyse the problem of an identity crisis in her first novel “The Bluest Eye” and the essential solutions being loving one’s black image, loving one’s black family and loving one’s black culture. These can be ways to retain one’s authentic identity.

Keywords: Racism, sexism, classism, exploitation, quest, pseudo-identity, identity confirmation, identity crisis, multiple oppressions.

Introduction

Toni Morrison is the first black woman writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. She is a powerful voice and one of the most remarkable and influential novelists in the field of contemporary African American literary circle. Her novels deal with the exploitation, sufferings, and humiliation of the Blacks in general and Black women in particular. They deal with problems such as feminism, racism, sexism, classism, the quest for identity, human relationship, identity confirmation, identity crisis and the quest for cultural independence.

The paper attempts to analyse the problem of an identity crisis in Toni Morrison first novel “The Bluest Eye”

Concept of Identity

The term “Identity” is used very widely and extensively in the fields of sociology, psychology, philosophy, and literary criticism. It is so much loaded with meanings, values, and prejudices that it is very difficult to define such a term through a proper definition. However, the identity that is related to the current study emphasizes the features, characteristics, and attitudes that an individual or a community have, that make them poles apart from other people or communities. Basically, it implies the recognition of one's existence or at least a trait of it which relates him to his group, his class, his race, his profession, his religion or his country.

Identity means essentially how a person sees himself in relation to his world. It's a sense of self or individuality in the context of life and what lies ahead. Identity contains as Erik Erikson so accurately indicates, "a complementarity of past and future both in the individual and in society." [Erik Erikson, Identity 310] Identity formation is always a changing and developing process making it a generational issue. Erikson established the theoretical foundation to understand adolescent psychosocial development. His cornerstone was identity development. In Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the emergence of an identity crisis occurs during the teenage years in which people struggle between feelings of identity versus role confusion. Theorist Erik H. Erikson coined the term 'identity crisis'. Erikson defines crisis as "a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another marshalling resource of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (Erikson 1959). No longer confining to the individual, Identity Crisis can characterize a group, an institution, a class, a profession or even a nation. A person who has a firm sense of identity is able to withstand the self-hate and hate of others. The loss of identity or acceptance of negative identity is often seen in the adolescent's rebellious nature to his family or community.

Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* offers a story of two black families namely, the Breedloves and the Mac Teers having a difference in perceptions of survival techniques.

Role of MacTeers Family in Identity Formation

MacTeers Household- In MacTeers household, the parents are strict and harsh but they are also practical enough to provide survival tactics to their two children, Frieda and Claudia, from childhood. The presence of child-parents bond based on discipline is undeniable with the MacTeers. It works for the children as medicine which can be bitter in taste but heals the wounds from inside. According to Monika Gupta, both Claudia and Frieda "get nurturing care and rough but sustaining love" as such that the MacTeer family even in poverty "offers a stable

home where children are looked after and are even offered presents at Christmas”. (Gupta, 67)

For example, Claudia says:

“Adults do not talk to us – they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. How they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick? We cannot answer them. Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black drought, and castor oil that blunts our minds.” (Morrison, 5-6)

At the same time, Claudia also says in her wish for Christmas:

“I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone” (Morrison, 15).

Mr. Macteer of *The Bluest Eye* is always instinctively protective and caring father who is always present for his two daughters namely Frieda and Claudia. We can see the bond and the memories of a father-daughter relationship in this narrative by Claudia. She says:

My daddy’s face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to an avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs of leafless trees. His skin takes on the pale, cheerless yellow of winter sun; for a jaw, he has the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble; his high forehead is the frozen sweep of Erie, hiding currents of gelid thoughts that eddy in darkness. Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills. A Vulcan guarding the flames, he gives us instructions about which door to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, lays kindling by, discuss qualities of coal, and teaches us how to rake, feed and bank the fire. And he will not unrazor his lips until spring. (Morrison, 47)

We can also see him as a devoted father during Frieda's molestation by Henry, their tenant.

We can sense the serious and genuine anger of a father in the following lines:

And Mr. Buford came running out with his gun, and Mama told him to go somewhere and sit down, and Daddy said no, give him the gun, and Mr. Buford did, and Mama screamed, and Mr. Henry shut up and started running, and Daddy shot at him and Mr. Henry jumped out of his shoes and kept on running in his shocks. Then Rosemary came out and said that Daddy was going to jail, and I hit her. (Morrison, 77)

The love, support, and care of Mrs. MacTeer towards her daughter when Claudia is sick include both scolding as well as tender care. We can also see Mrs. MacTeer's strict and tough side of her love for Claudia. To quote Claudia:

"Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve", then "she scoops a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it" in her mouth to swallow. Then a hot flannel is also wrapped around her neck and chest. Finally, she is "covered with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat. (Morrison, 6)

Claudia says:

My mother's voice drones on. She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia. She wipes it up as best and puts a scratchy towel over the large wet place ... My mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me but at my sickness. I believe she despises my weakness for letting the sickness "take holt." By and by I will not get sick; I will refuse to. But for now, I am crying. I know I am making more snot, but I can't stop." (Morrison, 6-7)

Further, Claudia says that when she coughs hard in the night, her mother's "hands repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment" on her forehead; and so when she remembers autumn she can only think about her mother "with hands who does not want

me [Claudia] to die” (6-7) On the other hand, Mrs. MacTeer’s love and concern for Frieda can also be seen especially during Frieda’s molestation episode. Frieda says, “[My] Mama would take me to the doctor, because I might be ruined, and Mama started screaming all over again” (78).

In addition, Mrs. MacTeer not only cares but also gives lessons and tactics for survival. She sings the songs for her children that talks about the hardships of life and set rules but there is a sense of sweetness and hope in her singing. She talks about the grief and pain that she has gone through but she also teaches her children how to fight back and how to stay strong during bad times. Claudia reminiscences in the following lines:

Saturdays were lonesome, fussy, soapy days. ... If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn’t bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and- left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, ... Misery colored by the grebes and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, but it was also sweet.”
(17-18)

The Role of Breedlove’s Family in Identity Formation

Pecola Breedlove is the protagonist of the novel who is a vulnerable black girl child. She is the daughter of Cholly Breedlove, a lustful father, and Pauline Breedlove. She wants to get rid of her ugliness i.e. her blackness and so she longs for the blue eyes which is the sign of white beauty. She is insulted, humiliated, exploited and looked down by almost all, the Blacks and the Whites. She does not get love and parental care at home. She feels that she has to suffer everything only because of her blackness. There are many incidents in the novel where Pecola is victimized because of her colour and that compels her to crave for the blue eyes like Maureen Peal. Unfortunately, Pecola ends up into a delusional world of madness and dies along with her

baby without a voice of her own to shout back. She becomes the victim of the pseudo-identity which results because of her futile existence and her failure in identity formation.

Breedlove Household- On the other hand, the reality of false parenthood is portrayed in Breedlove's household which represents chaos, lapses, and loopholes created by its weak parenting. Neither of the parents possesses self-esteem and self-respect that they can pass it on to their children. According to Dorothy H. Lee, Cholly's life represents "rejection and humiliation caused and intensified by poverty and Blackness". (Evans, 347). Similarly, she says that Pauline by being the "ideal servant" of the white household pathetically nurtures an illusionary "power, praise and luxury" (347).

To quote the episode of the fight between Cholly and Pauline:

Sammy was awake now too, but pretending to be asleep. Pecola held her stomach muscles taut and conserved her breath ... To deprive her of these fights was to deprive her of all the zests and reasonableness of life. Cholly, by his habitual drunkenness and orderliness, provided them both with the material they needed to make their lives together ... The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus." (Morrison, 30-31)

The two children react differently towards the fights between parents. Sammy being aggressive screams, "kill him! kill him!" while Pecola being submissive just wants herself to disappear. The Breedloves shows the damaged family where everything looks artificial without having any solid ground of values to guarantee their survival. To cite one such narration:

Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behaviour, the rest of the family – Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove – wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them ...

Mrs. Breedlove handed hers as an actor does a prop: for the articulation of character, for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers – martyrdom. Sammy used him as a weapon on the basis of it: people who could be fascinated, even intimidated by it. And Pecola. She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed – peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask. (Morrison, 28-29)

In the case of Cholly Breedlove, unlike Mr. Macteer, he is introduced to the reader as a damaged person from the beginning of the novel. He represents the damaged, invisible, absent and unconnected father who belongs to a non-existent family. He was abandoned by his parents as a child. Later on, he was brought up by his mother's aunt. Cholly Breedlove works in a coal mine. We hear Claudia saying that he was in jail after he "put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration" and "indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger" while "Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; Pecola was to stay with us [the MacTeers family]" (Morrison, 12).

In fact, Cholly's attitude towards his family is apparent in these lines:

But the aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally dysfunctional was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children; and never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be ... As it was, he reacted to them, and his reaction was based on what he felt at the moment. (126-7)

However, the trouble starts to linger when the protective roof collapses immediately above the residents of the house called 'family' when the father figure become lustful towards the innocence and vulnerability of the girl child. In the case of Pecola, she is destroyed completely because of her father's inability to control his 'free love' or we can say that because

of her father's inability 'to love her truly like a father'. The sanctity and affection of a father-daughter relationship are subverted and broken by the 'love' that Cholly shows for Pecola and his mixed emotion towards Pecola that evolves into a wicked crime. Bhaskar A. Shukla further adds that this dangerous free love depicts his experiences of losing his "mother, father, community and home" (Shukla, 76).

Morrison through the character of Claudia tries to give a very unique and insightful glimpse behind Cholly's action, his twisted incest acts, and mentality of a confused father.

She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or felt ... The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love ... The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in bilious dust. What could he do for her – the ever? What gives her? What say to her? ... If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him – the love would move him to fury... (Morrison, 127)

However, Shukla says that Claudia is the only person who believed that he "was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (Shukla, 76). However, Morrison says that "his touch was fatal" because "the love of a free man is never safe". (Morrison, 163).

Yet, another very disturbing and very hard to accept was Cholly's monstrous act of repeated rape of his daughter Pecola resulting in her pregnancy. If the rape has happened only once then it can be taken and considered as an accidental crime or incest. But this sinful act was repeated which proves that he was actually enjoying himself somewhere. Probably he was getting some forbidden pleasure based on pure lust.

The tenderness welled up in him, and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling on all fours towards her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke... The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. Surrounding all this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her – tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. ... Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced her to cover her. (128)

A girl child shares a very delicate, beautiful and unbreakable bond with her mother which turns into the most important and life-defining relationship of a girl's lifetime. In other words, if the father is the protective roof of the family, then mother definitely is the nurturing foundation of the household and family. However, Toni Morrison says that "when the strength of a race depends on its beauty when the focus is turned to how one looks in opposed to what one is, we are in trouble". And when such concept of false beauty makes a mother's presence hollow and weak then it most definitely affects the coming generation. They cannot fight for their survival and existence. They cannot exercise any confidence to evolve or adapt.

As a mother, instead of being nurturing and caring, Pauline Breedlove's motherhood is destructive and phony. Pauline Breedlove tries to create more fear as she stones "a loud desire to run away" into her son and "into her daughter a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (100). She does not realize her shortcomings. Instead she "felt she was fulfilling a mother's role" as she pointed out Cholly's faults by punishing "them when they showed any

slovenliness” while she was working “twelve to sixteen hours a day to support them” (100). She neglected her own family while working for a white family with her selfish illusions. In fact, she believed that “Power, praise and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she had never had – a nickname – Polly” (Morrison, 9). She spends more money to look beautiful following the ways of the white countrywomen. As the narrator puts it, “Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another-physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought.” (95)

Instead of showering the warmth of her love on Pecola, Pauline even ignores Pecola’s burn and instead she tries to comfort the white baby by cooing to hush and to “cry no more” and saying “Polly will change it [the baby’s dress]” (Morrison, 85). Pauline gives the coldest shoulder to Pecola to the extent that Pecola cannot talk about her repeated rape to her own mother. In her insanity, she talks to her split Personality and says, “You’re right. No use of telling her when she wouldn’t believe you” (Morrison, 158). Tragically, that’s why both Pecola and her child never get the chance to heal and reconcile. Carmen Gillespie rightly comments on Pecola’s existence in the family:

“The two major deterministic forces in Pecola’s young life are her mother and father, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. Significantly, Pecola never calls either of her parents’ mom or dad, demonstrating the psychological and emotional distance between the young girl and her parents.” (52)

Racism plays a significant role in Pauline’s attitude towards her own daughter. It becomes more complex for a black mother whose perception of self-identity and that of her children is based on the false ideas of physical beauty i.e. being white which is indeed biased and phony. The effect of this can be seen in Pauline’s transformation from a loving, caring, nurturing mother into something that is controlling and colonizing. In fact, she had the longing and connection with the unborn Pecola. However, soon after Pecola’s birth, her motherly

affection gets disturbed. There is a gradual shift and gradually she loses the emotional attachment with her child Pecola. As soon as Pecola is born, Pauline declares her ugly.

Anyways, the baby comes. Big old healthy thing. She looked different from what I thought. Reckon I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind's eye view of it. So, when I seed it, it was looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You know who she is, but she doesn't look the same. They give her to me for nursing, and she liked to pull my nipple off right away. She caught on fast. Not like Sammy, he was the hardest child to feed. But Pecola looked like she knew right off what to do. A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her. You know they make them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly. (Morrison, 97-8)

This false conception of self-identity is visible in both mother and daughter namely Pauline and Pecola. Their mentality that is based on the shallow and colonized white ideal beauty is the impact of racism. Pecola starts to long for blue eyes which is the symbol of white beauty. She feels that blue eyes will give her freedom from all the worries and bad things. Once she gets the blue eyes, then she will be accepted and loved by all. At one point the novel, Pecola wonders, "maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too" if she had pretty 'blue eyes' (Morrison, 34). In addition, Pecola eats Mary Jane candies because to eat "the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane" and so the nine candies from three pennies " had brought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane" (38). This proves to be very devastating in the long run. According to Shukla, it depicts Pecola's "denial of self and substitution of the self into the store bought image" of white beauty (Shukla, 73).

However, there is a difference with the two daughters of Masters because of the strong sense of individuality imparted to them by their parents. Differences in their upbringings make them react differently to the situations.

Arya says: "... Claudia sustains herself because she saves herself from the adverse effect of the White Euro-centric standard. She was taught by her parents' survival technique, which Pecola's parents never give to their children" (Arya, 38).

Conclusion

Pecola falls into grave downfall without getting any opportunity and strength to fight back for her survival and existence. She does not have any chance of rising up again. She cannot come out from the oppressive labyrinth of sexism, classism, and racism. Unlike Pecola, Claudia and Frieda are strong and lucky enough to observe and adapt tactics to fight back for survival and existence. The reason for this being the difference in their upbringings by their respective families.

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